

Libido

What is libido?

Your libido is your sexual interest and desire, otherwise known as your 'sex drive'. Libido varies from woman to woman and can be influenced by a range of different factors. Loss or reduction of libido may be experienced by women of any age and may result in reduced desire to have sex and/or sexual experiences that are no longer satisfying or pleasurable. All women will experience low libido at some time in their lives – this may be prolonged or short term (e.g. after the birth of a baby, during a stressful life period or when a relationship is rocky). Low libido can become an issue in relationships when one partner wants sex more often than the other and this desire discrepancy can cause conflict and unhappiness.

What influences your libido?

Hormones:

Hormone levels can affect your libido. For example, breastfeeding women have an increased production of prolactin, which can reduce sexual desire, and women who have reached menopause experience a reduction in sex hormones, which can reduce libido.

Medical conditions:

There are a range of illnesses and medical conditions that can affect your libido, including:

- anaemia
- kidney failure
- infections, e.g. thrush or urinary tract
- hypothyroidism (underactive thyroid gland)
- chronic pain
- depression

Sexual conditions:

There are a range of sexual conditions that can also affect your libido, including:

- dyspareunia – painful sexual intercourse, due to physical or psychological causes
- vaginismus – intercourse is difficult or impossible due to involuntary spasm of pelvic floor muscles
- orgasm problems – inability to orgasm or reach orgasm in a reasonable amount of time

Psychological factors:

Libido can be affected by stress, depression, anxiety, resentment, poor body image and shame and guilt about sex.

Medication:

Some medications have side-effects that may affect your libido. Antidepressants and some oral contraceptive pills can decrease libido (due to changes in hormone levels). If you feel a medication that you are taking is affecting your libido, speak to your health professional about alternative treatments for your condition. Taking drugs (e.g. marijuana, alcohol) may also affect your libido.

Lifestyle:

Rest, relaxation, recreation and suitable exercise can all have positive effects on your libido, as well as on your health, bones, mood and general wellbeing. Therefore, if you are not maintaining a healthy and balanced lifestyle, you may experience reduced libido.

State of your relationship:

There are a number of relationship factors that can affect libido, including:

- familiarity, i.e. ending of the early 'honeymoon' period of the relationship
- being time poor or feeling too tired/fatigued for sex
- poor sexual compatibility or partner sexual problems
- experiencing problems that don't have anything to do with sex, e.g. financial issues
- changes to the physical appearance of your partner, e.g. excessive weight gain, poor hygiene

If your relationship is unhappy and/or the sex you are having is disappointing, your willingness to engage in sex will be reduced. If you and your partner are not satisfied with your sex life, you can seek professional counselling. Speak to your general practitioner for more information.

What can you do?

Don't be concerned about when or how often others have sex; there is no 'normal' when it comes to the frequency of sex. What's important is whether you and your partner are happy with your level of sexual activity. If your libido level worries you or is very different from your partner's and causes you distress, there are a number of things you can do to improve the situation. Finding a solution to the problem involves determining what factors are reducing your libido and then trying to remove or reduce these factors as much as you can.

The most important thing to remember is that just because one person has a lower level of libido than the other in a relationship doesn't necessarily mean there is something wrong with them. It is when the difference in libido is causing problems that you may need to seek help to manage the issue.

Some things to consider in managing your libido

The following are a variety of simple tips and things you can do to maintain, increase or improve your libido:

- maintain a healthy lifestyle by being physically active, eating a healthy diet, reducing your alcohol intake and taking time out to relax regularly
- if you are overweight, losing weight may help you feel better about your body and improve your level of desire
- try to find ways to manage your stress levels; this may improve your mental, physical and sexual wellbeing
- if you are busy, don't wait for sex to happen spontaneously; allocate time for sex in your schedule
- find or create a physical environment that will be conducive to sensuality and intimacy
- you are more likely to want sex with your partner if there is plenty of goodwill in your relationship; women who are fulfilled by their relationship are more likely to feel sexually generous towards their partner
- ensure that your partner knows what makes you feel loved and wooed and encourage them to do these things and do the same for them in return; ask your partner to provide a regular supply of desire enhancers, e.g. affection, communication and conversation, quality time together, romance
- sharing the domestic responsibilities at home may increase goodwill between partners and this may in turn contribute to maintaining a healthy relationship. Reassess what chores/cleaning are really necessary; not everything has to be spotless all the time. Ask your partner to do their share of the chores
- if you have low desire but still enjoy sex with your partner don't wait to feel lust before you have sex, as many women only feel sexual desire **after** they become sexually aroused. Rather than waiting to have 'desire-driven' sex fuelled by lust, engage in 'decision-driven' sex, where you make a conscious choice to have sex and enjoy it
- when desire is low you can choose to have sex for a range of good reasons, e.g. for affection and intimacy, to please your partner, because you enjoy the sex or because regular sex is good for your relationship
- work with your partner together as a team to deal with libido issues. If there is desire discrepancy try to find a compromise by negotiating with your partner to find a solution agreeable to both of you
- when desire is low you might be more willing to have sex if you don't feel under pressure to become aroused during sex or you may prefer to give your partner manual or oral stimulation rather than have intercourse
- rather than automatically saying no to sex when the opportunity arises, ask yourself 'why not?' and if no good reason presents itself, go ahead and give it a try
- optimise the quality of sex you are having with your partner; the better the sex, the more likely you are to want it
- get to know your sexual anatomy (genitals) and learn how it works and what gives you pleasure
- don't focus on getting turned on, rather focus on what is sexy and feels good to you
- try communicating with your partner what works best for you during sex, they may not know what you like

Note: You should never feel that you have to have sex with someone that you are not attracted to or don't like or have sex that doesn't please you.

Seek advice

With greater awareness, knowledge and discussion about sexual health issues, more women are seeking advice for low libido from health practitioners. You may want to seek advice, with your partner if appropriate, from your general practitioner if your libido is causing problems in your relationship. Some of the following management options may be appropriate:

- treatment for any underlying illness or medical condition
- hormone therapy
- antidepressants (certain antidepressants may be suitable, others can reduce libido)
- stress management
- counselling

Where can I get more information?

www.jeanhailes.org.au

www.healthforwomen.org.au

www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au – Better Health Channel 1800 126 637

www.menopause.org/SHM/problems.aspx

'Where Did My Libido Go?' by Dr Rosie King available at www.jeanhailes.org.au

This resource was developed with the assistance of Dr Rosie King and with the support of the Australian Department of Health and Ageing
This fact sheet is designed to be informative and educational. It is not intended to provide specific medical advice or replace advice from your health practitioner.

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